

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 18THE WASHINGTON POST
PARADE MAGAZINE
21 September 1980

STORM WARNINGS AT OUR DOORSTEP

by Jack Anderson

Most Americans still think of the Caribbean countries on our southern shores as a luxurious string of "Fantasy Islands"—honeymoon hideaways where we can bask in the warm sun, fanned by gentle tropical breezes.

The grim truth is that the Caribbean nations are today being swept by revolutionary winds, fanned by Cuba's Fidel Castro in behalf of the Kremlin. Soviet strategists see the islands as political machetes aimed at more vulnerable and vital governments throughout Latin America. The Soviet goal, according to intelligence analyses, is to encircle the fabulous Caribbean oil reserves off the Mexican coast.

There is no doubt in the minds of American analysts that the Kremlin's wily old Leonid Brezhnev is hiding behind Castro's beard. Declares one top-secret study: "Castro has demonstrated that the issues that had strained Cuban-Soviet relations so severely [13 years ago] are no longer even minor irritants. Cuban submission has been complete. The brash, young Caribbean rebel of the mid-1960s has been replaced by a mature, responsible, self-critical member of the team"

Not until recently have U.S. policymakers awakened to the fact that our island neighbors, most of them newly independent of colonial rule, have become pawns in a power struggle for control of the Caribbean. Previously, the State Department treated the islands as training schools for young, inexperienced personnel or as pleasant but unimportant havens for aging diplomats and political hacks.

Only in the past few months has the Carter Administration begun to realize that a major confrontation is boiling up on our back doorsteps.

Two islands, Grenada and Jamaica, have already been drawn into the Castro orbit. Tiny St. Lucia is being magnetized in the same direction. So are the governments of Guyana and Surinam on the rim of the Caribbean basin. Across the Gulf of Mexico in Central America, our past treatment of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala as banana republics is bearing bitter fruit.

I have examined hundreds of pages of secret intelligence documents, which underscore the seriousness of the situation. In dry language, the disturbing documents tell a story of indifference, indecision and incompetence in Washington. Although this negligence now jeopardizes vital U.S. interests in the Caribbean, the story has been swept under the secrecy cover to avoid official embarrassment.

Consider these developments, which the Carter Administration has seemed helpless to cope with:

- A coup in Grenada in March 1979 provided Castro with a solid new foothold in the island chain. Marxist Maurice Bishop ousted the leader backed by the United States, Eric Gairy, and installed a totalitarian regime heavily reliant on Cuba.

- In Jamaica, Prime Minister Michael Manley has come under Castro's spell. With general elections in the offing, one secret intelligence report predicts he will "present a more moderate image to the voters" and play down his "intimacies with Havana" temporarily. But his heart, the report suggests, belongs to Castro.

- In Central America, the Nicaraguan junta is indebted to Castro for supporting their guerrilla movement, which ousted dictator Anastasio Somoza. Now the Cubans are repeating the Nicaraguan strategy in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Castro has been able to score these successes at a time when his own island economy is in sore distress. Cuban agriculture has been ravaged by two devastating crop years in a row. Falling living standards and worsening depression have caused widespread disaffection. The Soviets, with economic strains of their own, are unwilling to pump into Cuba more than the \$9 million a day they now invest.

Manpower, more than money or military manipulation, has been the secret of Castro's success in the islands. Take Grenada, where, according to a secret CIA report to Congress, "...as far as we can tell, the coup occurred...from local circumstances. The Soviets had nothing to do with it, or the Cubans either...."

But once the coup took place, Castro moved swiftly. A cadre of 250 Cubans went to work in the capital of St. George's, building a modern jet airport while the Americans twiddled their thumbs. Now Castro's military instructors are training Grenada's new people's army.

Within a week of the Somoza overthrow, Castro sent a consignment of 200 teachers to Nicaragua to help the new regime open schools for the fall session. By the close of the school year this summer, 1200 Cuban teachers were

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scattered throughout Nicaraguan classrooms parroting Communist propaganda.

A State Department official glumly commented: "Castro has an over-abundance of manpower. He has over-spent in the public service field so he can send school teachers, agronomists, health technicians and doctors into a country after a coup. They're on the job while we're still trying to push a package through Congress."

Fifteen months after Somoza's downfall, a Peace Corps program for Nicaragua is barely out of the planning stages. A \$75 million economic aid proposal for Nicaragua has been delayed in Congress by opponents of the junta government.

A defense intelligence study explains Castro's behavior this way: "Castro supported Latin American insurgents almost indiscriminately in the 1960s, despite the strains it created in his relations with Moscow. But he apparently now accepts the Soviet view that Latin America is not yet ripe for armed revolution. Castro reportedly also agreed in mid-1975 that any future support for armed insurgency would be channeled through the local pro-Soviet Communist parties."

A similar CIA report warned that Castro in 1975 entered a period of "passive association with armed struggle. Guerrillas were told by Havana to finance their activities through robbery and kidnapping and to increase their arsenal through theft and purchases through local sources."

The soil for revolution is fertile on almost every island of the Caribbean. High unemployment, primitive health conditions, illiteracy, widespread crime and government corruption are rampant. The per capita annual income runs from a starvation-level \$250 in impoverished Haiti to \$2000 in prosperous Barbados.

The coup in Grenada followed a period of unemployment that put 25 percent of the work force on the streets. A dangerous 50 percent of the youths couldn't find jobs.

Never shown in the travel brochures are the festering urban and rural slums, the gnawing malnutrition, the anguishing infant mortality rate. And just as the tourists are carefully screened from the stark, sub-human realities of life in the islands, the policymakers in Washington sometimes seem equally uninformed.

For a fleeting moment, Jimmy Carter focused on the Caribbean. His attention was attracted by the appearance of a 3000-man Soviet combat brigade, the lengthening of military runways and the digging of holes just the right size for missiles. But the Iranian hostage seizure and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan distracted him.

Meanwhile, he assigned a troubleshooter, ex-Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib, to scrutinize the situation. He found the U.S. position deteriorating dangerously.

Summed up Habib: "With the possible exception of Trinidad and Barbados, economic malaise and political and social

difficulties have created instability throughout the region. The existence of high expectations exacerbates this situation so that political leaders, especially those now on the scene, frequently espouse radical approaches to deal with seemingly insurmountable problems."

The troubleshooter offered a series of urgent recommendations to prevent the Caribbean countries from being picked off one by one by the Communists. His report, together with secret intelligence evaluations, is gathering dust in Washington files. Yet it offers a blueprint for averting political disaster on our threshold.

To begin with—let's face it—money can be a valuable weapon in countering the Communist threat. Dollar diplomacy has fallen into disfavor among many foreign policy experts, but the fact remains that the Caribbean governments are direly in need of cold cash.

In Jamaica, Manley's leftist government is strapped with a \$450 million debt and a stagnant economy. The International Monetary Fund turned down a credit and refinancing deal with his regime in March, and Manley has been scrambling for economic help ever since. His friend Castro has been unable to help because of Cuba's own economic crunch.

Unfortunately, Washington has been just as miserly. Congress has proposed a mere \$130 million development program for the entire area in the 1981 fiscal year, with nearly two-thirds of it being given directly to the recipient countries.

habib cautioned that not just more money, but better use of it, is needed. Too often the money never ends up in the hands of the impoverished people but in the pockets of profiteering government officials.

His report also strongly urged that Washington upgrade the diplomatic status of the Caribbean islands. "West Indian leaders," Habib wrote, "believe the United States has ignored the region, has sent to it in the past second-rate representatives, (and) failed to respond sufficiently to its needs..."

The White House has shown little interest in the proposals beyond assigning a few more experienced ambassadors to the region. In contrast, Castro is playing his diplomatic aces in the Caribbean. Two of his most senior and influential foreign service members have been sent there—Julian Rizo to Grenada and Ulises Estrada to Jamaica. Both are believed to hold high posts in the Cuban intelligence operation as well.

There is a hawk-and-dove dispute currently smoldering in Washington between human rights adherents such as the Interamerican Policy Group panel and military-intelligence officials. The IPCG says crying wolf at Castro's presence "lacks credibility," and it argues against increasing military aid.

The CIA and Pentagon contend that the Cuban threat is real and that increased American military assistance is essential. The argument between the two camps is expected to erupt in Congress, which has banned the use of U.S. aid to assist police forces in the region with weaponry.

The Caribbean cold war between Castro and Carter will reach a climactic showdown this fall in Jamaica when elections are to be held. Opposing Manley is conservative leader Edward Seaga, who has closely aligned himself with the United States.

The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research has stressed to Carter that Manley, from the first days of his administration, was taken in by Castro. "Manley's left

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wing supporters would like him to turn Jamaica into a Jamaican version of Cuba. Manley may indeed be tempted since he seems genuinely impressed with Cuba," warns one report.

Even if Seaga ousts Manley from power, the infighting will go on in the Caribbean, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency. In a secret report to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the DIA predicted Castro will continue to meddle in Caribbean waters.

Speculating on a possible Seaga victory, the document said: "We believe that this brief respite from leftist inroads in the Caribbean basin will be of very short duration. This area remains plagued by deep-rooted economic and social problems that seem insoluble. Moderate forces and democratic institutions in the region will

survive only if economic and security assistance is provided. DIA is convinced that despite Cuba's domestic problems, Havana remains determined to exploit the social and economic ills of the region not only to preserve the gains it has achieved up to now but also to pursue the goal of becoming the regional power. We will continue to see Cuba and the indigenous Marxist groups in the Caribbean and Central America probing further. They apparently believe that they can operate in the area with a greater degree of impunity than they have in the past."

This foreboding prediction will hold true as long as Uncle Sam persists in gazing southward at a fool's paradise of insignificant, untroubled islands in the sun.